VIOLENT POLITICS

A HISTORY OF INSURGENCY, TERRORISM, & GUERRILLA WAR, FROM THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION TO IRAQ

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A timely, provocative look at the pivotal and frightening role of insurgent tactics in world conflicts, from the American Revolution to the current crisis in the Middle East

No problem is greater or more seemingly intractable in the Middle East today than the tactics of insurgents in Iraq—methods that are being imitated with increasing frequency in Afghanistan as well. These deadly methods offer strategic success to those who utilize them while confounding those who are trying to impose a sense of calm and order.

In this essential and highly readable book, noted Middle East expert William R. Polk sets the current crisis within the context of world history as he illuminates the role played by guerrilla warriors in several conflicts, including the American Revolution and struggles in Ireland, Algeria, and Spain. He eventually moves to the Vietnam War and into the present day, where the lessons of this history are needed more than ever as we grapple with the ongoing campaign for peace in Afghanistan and Iraq.

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CHAPTER 11

THE AFGHAN RESISTANCE TO THE BRITISH AND THE RUSSIANS

REMOTE, RUGGED, AND BARREN, SOMEWHAT RESEMBLING IN SIZE AND terrain a combination of Colorado and New Mexico, Afghanistan was one of the few pieces of Asia and Africa not incorporated into the European empires in the nineteenth century. From the earliest recorded history, it has been a route rather than a destination. Chinese and Indian Buddhist pilgrims struggled over its high mountains passes; Alexander's Macedonians fought their ways through its mountains and deserts down to India; Central Asian Turks and Mongols sang of the delights of its rare gardens and limpid air but rarely tarried; and the Russians and British used its craggy heights and boulder-strewn valleys only to play their "Great Game" of espionage and cold war against each other. The British tried three times to add it to their Indian empire before giving up. Why, in 1979, long after the British had withdrawn from South Asia, the Russians neglected history and sought to conquer Afghanistan still baffles both Russian

and Western students of strategy. As one former Russian intelligence (KBG) officer shook his head in perplexity, "why Afghanistan? We have enough mountains in the Soviet Union already." But there was an ironic logic in the Russian policy: it was the Russian version of domino theory that so worried American strategists, but in reverse. Instead of worrying, as did John Foster Dulles, that the fall of Vietnam would spread Communism to surrounding countries, Leonid Brezhnev feared that a Communist failure in Afghanistan would impact on the Tajiks, Uzbeks, and other Turkoman peoples of Soviet Central Asia, infecting them with anti-Communist aspirations.

For the Afghans, of course, what the British and Russians thought—and sought—was irrelevant. They just wanted the foreigners to leave them alone. They always had stoutly opposed the entry of foreigners; the struggle against them was the substance of their sagas and myths. They hated the foreigners even when, as was true of many of them, they counted the foreigners among their forebearers. The people of the southeastern area known as Nuristan swear that they are descended from Alexander's legions, and the Hazaras of the high Hindu Kush mountains count Genghis Khan's hordes as their ancestors. More recently, many of the grandfathers of Afghanistan's Tajiks and Uzbeks were refugees who had fled the Communists during the bloody civil war that followed Russian Revolution. More than almost any other society, Afghans live their history. So, before looking at the guerrilla war of the 1980s, I begin with where they begin, the Great Game of the nineteenth century.

As the British thrust across the Indian subcontinent, collecting one after another the petty states into which the Mughal Empire had shattered, they reached what is now Pakistan by 1820. To the west was Sind, where they cowed a motley collection of local rulers into a treaty in that year. The treaty aimed to exclude European traders and—astonishingly—American settlers. European traders conceivably might come to compete for the market, and the British, in the middle of their great commercial expansion, were sure they would, but American settlers were a figment of their inflamed imagination. With Sind in their hands, the British turned northeast on the In-

dus river toward the Punjab, where in the last year of the eighteenth century, a remarkable Sikh leader named Ranjit Singh had begun to create an empire to rival the British. His was a forlorn ambition. Nothing could stop the British, and upon his death in 1839, they incorporated his territory. Control of the Indus valley brought them into contact with the Pathan peoples in what they later called the Northwest Frontier and Afghanistan.

Always moving forward, the British found no secure frontier. They were already beyond the Indus river and were still far from the mighty wall of the Hindu Kush mountain range. Beyond each hill was another valley, and there seemed no place to draw a line. That mattered to them because, within the living memory of many of their generals, other Europeans were trying to do what they had already done, conquer India. Napoleon got as far as Egypt before turning back. His attempt was more sound than fury, falling as it did more than a thousand miles too short, but the forward movement of the Russians lasted far longer and could be painted on the map.

The Russian advance began with Ivan IV, "the Terrible," who in Russia's first great military adventure in 1552 conquered a remnant of the vast Mongol Empire, the Khanate of Kazan. It was the conquest of Kazan that began the transformation of Russia from a petty city-state into a multinational empire. Because Kazan was an Islamic society with elaborate political, commercial, and intellectual structures and a fully formed legal and religious code, Ivan's churchmen set out on a thoroughgoing regime change, "to convert the pagans to the faith." And because the society was multiethnic, each of the newly defeated groups presented a key to further annexation. Next in line was the Khanate of Astrakhan, whose conquest in 1556 opened the Volga down to the Caspian Sea.

Ivan the Terrible already understood that the main obstacle to his imperial dream was England, so, as Winston Churchill was later to propose to Josef Stalin, he offered England a grand compromise: if Elizabeth, the Virgin Queen, would marry him, they could exchange wedding gifts that would meet the needs of both countries. Ivan would give the British a commercial monopoly in Central Asia if the

British would give him the arms he needed to solidify his conquest of it. The queen declined. Furious at this slight on his royal dignity, Ivan wrote, addressing her as *poshlaia dvitsa* (common wench); so with tongue in cheek we could date the beginning of Russo-British rivalry over Central Asia.

Elizabeth had sound dynastic reason for her rebuff of Ivan: Muscovy was still a minor state. It had overreached its power. Another of its Muslim neighbors, the Crimean Tatars, were able to regroup. They continued to fight the Muscovites and in 1571 even burned Moscow's suburbs, kidnapping and enslaving thousands of Russians. The Russians had lived in terror—and grudging admiration—of Turkic and Mongol peoples for generations, and in their first significant diplomatic contacts with the Muslim state of Kazan had come to respect its social and cultural achievements. Consequently, once a Central Asian, loosely collected under the term "Tatar," converted to Christianity, he was completely accepted into Moscow society; some Tatars eventually married into the Russian royal family, while those of noble background were often awarded the title *tsarovich*, or prince. The Russians never developed the sense of racial superiority the British evinced in India.

After Ivan died, Muscovy focused on domestic and European affairs. Then in 1721, Tsar Peter, "the Great," having made peace with Sweden, assembled an army and set off, as he said, toward the first stage on "the road to India." He planned to move down the Caspian to Herat on the border between Iran (or, as it was then known, Persia), then turn east to the ancient fortress city of Ghazni, turn up the Helmand river to Kabul, and cross the Khyber Pass south to Lahore. He did not make it. His troops were attacked and nearly annihilated by Turks from the Khanate of Khiva. Failure though it was, it was encapsulated into the long-lasting British nightmare of a Russian invasion of India.

Meanwhile, a young man whom Peter would probably have liked personally, a Ghilzai Afghan warrior named Mahmud, had made himself lord of the province of Qandahar. Instinctively he knew that the way to the hearts of the tribesmen was the capture of booty, so he

led a *lashkar* (raiding party) of Afghans across the forbidding Dasht-i Lut desert to sack the prosperous caravan city of Kerman. At that time, Safavid Persia, like Mughal India, was dying from the top. As the shah withdrew into his harem, the government fell apart and the provinces rose in revolt. Peter watched this disarray with interest. When a group of Russian merchants were robbed by outlaws, he saw an excuse and was tempted to move forward. But Mahmud beat him to the prize, Isfahan—then a city about the size of contemporary London—and forced the ruling shah to surrender. Mahmud's capital, Qandahar, which was the seedbed of modern Afghanistan, had become the center of a great empire determined and (temporarily) able to hold back both Russia and Britain.

Thus each group—the Afghans, the Russians, and the British—acquired a mindset that would determine their relations until our own times. The Afghans, while not yet a clearly formalized nation, had become imbued with a determination to rule their own neighborhood. The Russians, by the time of Catherine the Great, had come to feel a "manifest destiny" for the East as surely as Americans would for their West. Catherine resumed the march south and east. By 1792 the Russians had overwhelmed the Crimean Tatars and a few years later moved steadily, petty Turkish state by state, down the shores of the Black, Caspian, and Aral seas toward Persia and Afghanistan. Their route of march would lead them, the British believed, toward the goal Peter had proclaimed—India. And, obsessed as they were with fears of hordes of Cossacks galloping down from Russia into their new Indian empire, the British believed they would have to defend India from the Russians even if that meant having to conquer the Afghans.

Conquering the Afghans was attractive because their territory contained the only defensive line between the Indus river and Russian-dominated Central Asia. The mighty Hindu Kush mountain range, in the middle of Afghanistan, would then become a no-man's-land. In fact, it did. It became the playing field of the "Great Game" for both British and Russian officers and spies. One of the Russians, Captain Yan Vitkevich, who visited Kabul to offer its ruler a pact

with Russia, electrified the British authorities in India. Their first reaction was to send an ultimatum to the Afghan king Dost Mohammed demanding that he "desist from all correspondence . . . with agents of other powers." But they could not be sure that Dost Mohammed, whom they thought of as "wily and deceitful," would obey their command; so they decided to push into Afghanistan to put it under a puppet regime. That key move in what they then called the forward policy, they thought, would definitely and permanently checkmate further Russian advance. That was the cause of the First Afghan War in 1838–1839. On paper, it was a shrewd strategy, but it neglected one element, the Afghan people.

As in the many contemporary wars in Asia and Africa, the disciplined European troops and their native auxiliaries armed with cannon overwhelmed the Afghan forces, who had neither discipline nor cannon. In August 1839 the British captured Kabul and installed their puppet ruler and settled down to organize a new regime. The regime was hated. As the late Louis Dupree wrote, "The short, unhappy reign of [the British installed ruler] Shah Shuja began, propped up by British bayonets, supported by British gold, sustained by British and Indian blood. By most contemporary accounts, Shah Shuja, never popular with his people, encouraged further enmity as the glaring presence of the *farangi* [British] bayonets increased hated and distrust." From military triumph, the British sank into an insurgency they could not quell. As the historian Stanley Wolpert has written, "Guerrilla warfare, assassination, local uprisings, and looting became daily occurrences wherever British Indian troops were found in the land of the Afghans, in the bazaars of Kabul and Kandahar [Qandahar], along the road to the Khyber, in the palace itself." The British were baffled. Their commander, General Sir William Macnaghten, then wrote, "I have been striving in vain to sow *nifak* [dissension] among the rebels and it is perfectly wonderful how they hang together." What held them together and inspired them, the British decided, was a combination of Islam and hatred of foreigners. That insight was both an assessment and a prophecy.

The British faced the classic dilemma of occupying powers:

while it had been relatively easy to move in and overwhelm the army and government, it was increasingly difficult to move out. "Flexible response," the cliché coined in our own times, is easier done than flexible "unresponse." For the British in Kabul the problem quickly became acute—if they withdrew, their protégé would be chased away and their enemies would return, perhaps with Russian help, so the situation would be worse than before. Their defeat would encourage their enemies and terrorism might spread to India itself. But staying the course was expensive, unpopular, and insecure. The British solution was the usual mistake of governments, compromise, and produced the worst of both policies. They withdrew a large part of their contingent, mainly the fighting force, thus cutting down on expenses, while showing their decision to stay by importing the wives and families of their officers and the families and camp followers of their Indian troops. Almost overnight a virtual new city, a fortified enclave in Kabul—an early version of the "Green Zone" the Americans later created in Baghdad—sprang up haphazardly to house them all.

As attacks mounted, the British dallied, unable to stay but afraid to leave; then at the worst possible time, in the winter of 1841–1842, they abandoned Kabul and began to retreat down the Khyber Pass. Of the 16,500 people (including 4,500 troops) who set out, only one survivor reached British-held Jalalabad. The first British attempt to "pacify" Afghanistan had ended in the worst disaster the British army suffered in the nineteenth century, and the Afghans had won the most impressive guerrilla war of the century.

The war left legacies that have dominated Afghan history to the present day. The most important to outsiders was the recognition of the pivotal role of Afghanistan in Asian affairs. Never again would the British and the Russians be able to leave it alone. Viewing the British defeat—the Afghan version of Braddock's disaster during the French and Indian wars and the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu—the Indians were encouraged to believe they too might be able to drive out the foreigners. Fifteen years later, in the great Indian "Mutiny," they would try. As a contemporary British officer, unconsciously echoing Benjamin Franklin, laconically commented, Afghans and Indians

"had perceived that we were not invincible." Afghans had shown that imperialism could be defeated or made too costly to sustain, but their victory had been Pyrrhic: Afghan society, already fractured by culture, race, and religion, had been further split into mutually hostile communities so that subsequent attempts at reform and nation building would fail. As Afghans, Britons, Russians, and Americans would learn in the years to come, the guerrilla genie, once it had escaped from the bottle in 1840, has refused tamely to return.

Meanwhile, Britain retaliated for its humiliation as best it could, mainly with search-and-destroy raids, but for a generation it was occupied with absorbing Sind, Punjab, and the numerous Indian petty states just as the Russians were doing in Central Asia with Bukhara, Khiva, and Kokand. The two great powers were converging on Afghanistan.

Why they were doing so was puzzling. But the tsar's foreign minister, Prince A. M. Gorchakov, in December 1864 offered an explanation that contemporary British and French statesmen would have found persuasive:

> The position of Russia in Central Asia is that of all civilized states which are brought into contact with half savage, nomad populations possessing no fixed social organization. In such cases it always happens that the more civilized State is forced, in the interests of security of its frontiers and its commercial relations, to exercise a certain ascendancy over those whom their turbulent and unsettled character makes undesirable neighbors. [To do so, it must advance] deeper and deeper into barbarous countries . . . Such has been the fate of . . . the United States in America, France in Algeria, Holland in her colonies, England in India, all have been irresistibly forced, less by ambition than by imperious necessity, into this onward movement where the greatest difficulty is to know where to stop.

Not knowing where to stop got Britain into the second Afghan war. The "lesson" of Afghanistan had been forgotten by the next

generation of Englishmen, but the Afghans had not forgotten. They reacted with anger and fear to the buildup of a large British diplomatic and military staff in Kabul. Finally, in 1879, they assassinated a number of British officers. In their turn, the British grew fearful that the Russians might use the British humiliation to intervene. That was the general cause of the British decision to send a second army into Afghanistan. Since the only result was that was that the Afghans agreed that Britain would guide its virtually nonexistent foreign policy, the war produced no useful result, but so brutal were its exploits as to cause the fall of the English government in London and the replacement of its senior officials in Delhi.

The Russians were elated. Some even began to think that the sun of the British Empire was setting. Their hopes seemed confirmed when another Muslim force, the followers of the Mahdi in the faraway African Sudan, routed a British army and collapsed the incipient British empire in central Africa. With the encouragement these events gave them, the Russians again moved forward, this time assisted by the building of a railroad that seemed to the British like an arrow pointed south toward India. At the otherwise unimportant oasis of Panjdeh, a dependency of Afghanistan north of Herat, the Russians attacked and virtually annihilated a ragtag army of Afghans in March 1885. The British didn't care, of course, about the Afghan losses or about Panjdeh, which presumably few of them could find on a map, but they saw Panjdeh as another stepping stone on the route to India. Alarmed, Parliament voted a war chest. It seemed that the Crimean War was about to be refought.

Both sides recoiled from this near collision to deal with more urgent issues in Europe. Britain agreed that the Russians keep much of the area around Panjdeh, hoping it would be the final Russian demand. The two powers moved to agree on frontiers—a Russo-Afghan frontier along the Amu Darya river and an Indo-Afghan frontier in the foothills of the Hindu Kush mountains. A few years later one of the most desolate areas on the planet, the high mountains and frozen valleys in the far northeast of Afghanistan, was made into a buffer zone known as the Wakkan Corridor. On the map of what

the British statesman Lord Curzon had called the "chessboard upon which is being played out a game for the domination of the world," no further moves were to be allowed.

While the rest of the world plunged into the First World War, the Afghans enjoyed a rare period of tranquillity. A progressive new ruler proposed a program of reforms designed to make Afghanistan less of a chessboard for Europeans and itself a more capable manager of its own affairs. Alarmed rather than reassured by the fall of their old enemy, the tsar, the British reacted sternly when King Amanullah tried to reassert Afghan power over the Pathan tribes on what the British called the Northwest Frontier. That was the cause of the third Anglo-Afghan war in the spring of 1919. Again, the British won all the battles but lost the war. In the treaty ending the fight, they gave up control over Afghan affairs and even allowed the Afghans to establish relations with the new Communist government of Russia.

The Great Game was in remission for a generation. It seemed to have ended definitely when the British withdrew from India in 1947. But what actually happened was that Britain's role was taken up, haltingly, almost inadvertently, by the Americans as a sort of adjunct to what really interested the Eisenhower Administration, the countries that Secretary of State John Foster Dulles had drawn together (including the newly established Pakistan) into what was popularly known as the Baghdad Pact.

It was at the beginning of the Kennedy Administration that I became involved with Afghan affairs. There was very little, I found, in the government archives and nothing in the press worth reading about Afghanistan. So I was delighted when the then undersecretary of state, Governor Chester Bowles, asked me to join him for an inspection tour. What we found was that the tiny American embassy was considered a hardship post that ambitious officials sought to avoid. The AID mission director had never been outside the capital, and his team took a relaxed view of the ill-conceived projects that had been mounted in the previous administration. I decided to make an analysis of Afghan-American relations. At the invitation of the then Afghan government, I made a two-thousand-kilometer

inspection tour by jeep that, among other things, introduced me to the provincial governors and tribal leaders. What came clear from the visit was that Afghanistan was a remarkably varied society on which the guidance of the central administration rested lightly. The people were among the poorest in the world but had a sense of independence and personal worth that virtually overcame their poverty. The Afghan code of honor, particularly but by no means uniquely practiced among the Pathan tribes where it was known as the Pukhtunwali, illuminated and guided their lives.

The Pukhtunwali rested on the concept that every village, clan, or tribe was a separate entity, virtually a miniature nation-state. Each had the collective obligation to defend its citizens, their property, and their honor. Thus, it absolutely commanded the taking of revenge (*badal*) for wrongs or insults to any of its members by outsiders, as the British had learned and the Russians soon would. As among the pre-Islamic Arabs, in the absence of overarching civic institutions and organizations, the certainty that revenge would be taken was the final, indeed the only, safeguard for the individual. That was the theory, but the practice was unending feuding. Consequently, every Afghan was armed and always ready to fight.

The imperative of revenge was softened by the parallel imperative of hospitality (*melmastia*). Afghan refugees or travelers could demand, and would receive, both hospitality and protection even from enemies. In villages where the inhabitants teetered on the brink of starvation, my team and I were greeted with ruinous generosity. To have attempted to pay for or to have refused what was offered would have been a mortal insult. As guests we were under the protection of our hosts, who had the absolute obligation to defend us or die trying. (Americans would later be baffled by the silent refusal of such poor people to turn over Osama bin Ladin for the, to them, astronomical sum of $25 million.)

Also evidently governing the lives of Afghans was their religion, Islam. Islam did not become a part of the life of the Afghans until the tenth century, more than three hundred years after it was almost universally adopted by Arabs, Persians, and Berbers. But, in every

moment of the day, as I observed, it regulated life and, like Christianity, Hinduism, and Judaism, incorporated local custom and belief. More, it permeated the whole society. Any person who felt the urge to talk about, teach, or lead his fellows became in his own eyes and those of his fellows what Christians would think of as a priest or pastor, and Jews, a rabbi. The small and diverse Afghan society included at least a quarter of a million mullahs. Being a mullah, however, did not make a man any less a herdsman, farmer, merchant, or warrior. (The Russians would later learn this to their great cost.) Even apart from the mullahs, the Afghans evinced a deeper commitment to Islam in their daily lives than I had ever seen in my years of study and residence in the Arab countries. Throughout history in times of crisis or warfare, this commitment to religion is manifested in the requirement to perform jihad—religious struggle including, if necessary, holy war. Not just mullahs but every man was expected to serve as a *mujahid* or voluntary defender of the faith even if, indeed especially if, doing to was likely to force him to die as a "martyr" (a *shahid*) for having "borne witness" (*shahada*) to his faith. Afghan guerrillas, later fighting against the "Godless Russians," would call themselves mujahideen.

Two other partly contradictory forces were evident everywhere I went: the dominance of recognized headmen, usually known as *maliks,* and the insistence on a form of primitive democracy, the popular assembly, the *jirga.* The *jirga* is the occasion where the opinions of the community are sorted out, and the *malik* becomes the manifestation of community consensus. The writ of the *jirga* is local and the *malik* usually has little influence and no power outside his own group. This autonomy set the pattern that was later manifested in the guerrilla war against the Russians. There was no effective way that villages could be grouped together and so coerced by the Russians, but also no way that they could become a single political or guerrilla organization to fight the Russians. Just as there were about fifteen thousand villages, each with its own *jirga,* so would there be in the 1980s thousands of groups of men who functioned at least part-time as guerrillas.

The one institution that gave partial unity to Afghanistan was the monarchy, but the figure who embodied it was only temporary. The king who won Afghan independence in 1919, Amanullah, was overthrown by a tribal rebellion ten years later. During the period of chaos that followed, power was briefly seized by an illiterate Tajik bandit chief who was a prototype of the warlords who virtually destroyed Afghanistan sixty years later in the 1990s. After a period of savage repression and organized mass looting, a member of the old ruling order, Nadir Khan, rallied the Pathan tribes. The price Nadir had to pay was that the forces on which he had to rely, "several thousand tribesmen, undisciplined and hungry for loot," had to be allowed to sack Kabul. Then, in a ceremony like the ones in which Roman legions "elected" their emperors, the tribesmen brandished their weapons and shouted Nadir Khan onto the throne. And, like many of the Roman emperors, Nadir himself would be assassinated after a brief reign.

Kings followed in rapid succession, but the monarchy as an institution survived until 1973, when King Mohammed Zahir was overthrown by his brother-in-law, Sadar Muhammad Daoud, who proclaimed what he euphemistically called a republic. Like many Afghan rulers, Daoud alternated reform programs with tyranny and managed in the course of his rule to alienate both the young liberal reformers who had grown in the permissive atmosphere of Zahir's rule and the conservative mullahs who represented traditional Afghanistan. In retrospect, however, the key domestic aspect of Daoud's period of control, which lasted only five years, was that it removed the unifying force of the monarchy while the key foreign aspect was that it brought back, in a new form, the Great Game.

Daoud, like his cousin, had invited Soviet participation in arming and training his army. There were then about three thousand Russian "advisers" in Afghanistan. They were closely watched by the Afghans and were careful not to appear to take part in Afghan politics. But obviously they had some impact on the attitudes of their "students." Some of the latter were in league with the leaders of the leftist political parties. Daoud grew suspicious of them and decided

to arrest them. He bungled the move, and one managed to organize supporters in the army who besieged and then murdered him on April 27, 1978. They then proclaimed the "Democratic Republic of Afghanistan." Perhaps surprisingly, it was not a popular move because outside the army the Shravi, as the Afghans called the Russian successors to the British, were already universally unpopular. Needing them to survive, however, the new government invited the Soviets to double their number. Within a few months, Daoud's murderers fell out with one another, and the survivor, Hafizullah Amin, fearing for his life, invited the Russians to send in regular troops. The Russians later claimed that they had no choice but to comply, since without their help the pro-Russian government would have collapsed. Had it done so, they feared the ethnic conflict in Afghanistan might have spilled over into Soviet Central Asia. In the attempt to prevent this, Soviet troops began arriving on December 27, 1979.

So, within a year after the fall of Daoud, the U.S. government grew alarmed, as the British had been, by the Russian move into Afghanistan and what it feared might become a Russian move through Afghanistan toward India and Pakistan. A Soviet "forward" policy was alarming to the Americans, even though neither India nor Pakistan was integral to Western defense, and India, in particular, was often opposed to American policies. Perhaps more attractive to Washington was that, as a part of its cold war strategy, it was seeking ways to weaken the Soviet Union. As it did in other areas, it hit upon the idea of stimulating a proxy war against the Russians; with Pakistani and Saudi Arabian help, it began to identify, seek out, and supply with covert military equipment the Afghans who opposed the Russians. Such people were easy to find. Every village felt besieged by the Russians, who would ultimately number about 125,000. When some villagers reacted by stealing goods or shooting at soldiers, the Communist government or the Russians arrested or shot protesters; in panic, Afghans began to flee. This first major flight would become a torrent, of about half a million people. But, of course, most stayed; then as little groups of villagers got angry or hungry, they became guerrillas and began to kill Russians and their Afghan surrogates.

What might be called the fourth Afghan war was on. It would last a decade.

Most of the native opponents of the Russians were Muslim fundamentalists. Some were Sunni Muslims and others were Shiis. While all fought in the name of Islam, they fought separately by village or tribe. They were joined by foreign volunteers from Central Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and other Muslim areas. Of these volunteers, the best known is Osama bin Ladin, who came from Saudi Arabia. While the fundamentalists took American help and welcomed foreign aid workers and particularly doctors—and occasional journalists in the hope of creating favorable comment in the Western press—they made no secret of the fact that they hated with almost equal fervor both the Russians and the Americans. The Americans, in Afghan eyes, were just a new generation of Englishmen, intent on dominating their country and destroying their way of life.

The guerrillas were primarily villagers. The Russians, in the time-honored way of occupying powers, referred to them as "bandits" (*basmachis*). There never was a unified resistance organization. The first relatively large-scale guerrilla action occurred in the southeastern province of Nuristan. Attacks on the government and on the Russians then spread spontaneously village by village as *jirgas* met and as their *maliks* led their men in raids. Consequently, the groups began small—usually fewer than thirty men—and with a few exceptions stayed small. Some attempts were made at coordination, particularly through *chabnameh* (what have been termed "night letters"), which were passed from hand to hand within the mixed community of Kabul denouncing the government and the Russians, but it does not appear that any serious attempt was made to create a "national" movement from the separate bands. Because of the history of the country, its poor internal communication, and its ethnic diversity, each group treated both the Russians and other opponents of the regime as rivals and often raided or fought them indiscriminately. As two of the most perceptive commentators, Richard Barnet and Eqbal Ahmad, wrote, the mujahideen were "too disunited to win the war, but they are too spread out to lose it."

It was only as increasing numbers of Afghans fled to Pakistan, numbering about two million by the spring of 1981, that they set up committees to act as middlemen with the Pakistanis, Saudis, and Americans. To convince their suppliers to support them, these "external mujahideen" attempted to coalesce into larger-scale resistance movements and, within the limits imposed by the Pakistani authorities, a dozen or so of them created virtual states within refugee camps and in such cities as Rawalpindi, each with its own armed followers, its arms merchants and armorers. Thus, as in the Algerian war of the 1950s and 1960s, the Afghan resistance was divided into internal and external organizations. The actual fighting was done internally mainly by peasants led by their headmen, village by village, while the external organizations occupied themselves with collecting money, food, and weapons to support their followers. In effect, Mao's "sea" was being created in Pakistan while the "fish" remained in Afghanistan. The two groups were often cut off from each other. As Barnett R. Rubin then observed, "The commanders do not take orders from the exiled leaders. They derive their effectiveness and legitimacy not from party membership but from their ability to function as local leaders acting as intermediaries with outsiders." But communications, rudimentary though they were, were surprisingly good. Relying on runners to pass messages, they did not have radios whose coded messages, as in Vietnam, could be broken by the more sophisticated foreign power, but, as foreign visitors discovered, were quite effective even over long distances.

During most of the rebellion, each external "party" was restricted to a given ethnic group. Pakistan offered such coordination as existed among them; through Pakistan's intelligence service, American covert aid was channeled, while Saudi Arabia, also acting in coordination with the Americans, dealt with groups in touch with its own fundamentalist religious establishment. The leader of the Saudi group, Abdur-Rabb Sayyaf, who later would inspire Muslim guerrillas in the Philippines, became the first prime minister of the government-in-exile. To counterbalance this mainly Sunni Muslim grouping, the Revolutionary Government of Iran recognized and aided several Shia

Muslim émigré groups in Tehran, but they played almost no role in the internal resistance.

Unlike most of the insurgencies I have studied, the Afghan insurgency was motivated neither by nationalism nor by ideology. It defined itself in terms of its enemy. The enemy was not so much Communism as Russia, and not only Russia alone but all foreigners. The Afghans accepted outside help but did so reluctantly and without affection for the donors. Xenophobia must be considered to have been a major motivation. Insofar as it was refined into something like an ideology, it was defined by Islam. But it was not religion, per se, that seems to have most motivated people: it was the Afghan "way," the social code that was encapsulated in Islam that Afghans felt was being attacked and that they determined to protect. As a Hezb-i Islami commander told the English visitor Peregrine Hodson, "It is true that Afghanis is a poor country, but the most precious thing we have is our faith; without it we have nothing. We are fighting to protect our religion."

Dedication to an Islamic way of life, while obviously universal in Afghanistan, never proved strong enough to overcome ethnic differences or even geographical separation. The only insurgent organization that was able to overcome these barriers was what was originally and remained a largely Shia Tajik group that came to be called the Northern Alliance. It was formed by the charismatic guerrilla commander Ahmad Shah Massoud. He alone was able to draw adherents from neighboring communities. Like the leaders of other groups, he began with only about fifty followers. What set his movement apart, in addition to the fact that it grew and created alliances with other groups, was that it commanded a mini state, the Panjshir valley northeast of Kabul. Even though they bombed, rocketed, and machine-gunned it from the air and repeatedly invaded with columns of tanks, the Russians were never able to conquer and hold it. Heavily outnumbered and outgunned, Massoud was driven in 1983 to work out a temporary cease-fire with the Russians. The cease-fire lasted a year, but unlike the deals with the enemy that crippled the Cetniks of Yugoslavia and undermined the EDES in Greece, Massoud does

not seem to have been criticized for it. Rather he was praised for his cleverness in outsmarting the Russians and using the lull in fighting to rebuild his depleted forces, by then numbering about three thousand men, and to gather supplies to resume the fight.

Like many of the guerrilla leaders we have reviewed, Massoud wanted to convert his followers into a regular army. So, as he gathered strength, he levied taxes on the villagers and duty on gems mined in the nearby mountains; he also solicited contributions from Afghans in other areas. With these resources, he was able to pay his followers regular salaries so that they were able to fight full-time. He organized them into two kinds of formations: the local defenders were volunteers who were protecting their houses, families, and livestock. These *sabets,* as they were known, were essentially "minute men," at ready call. Being available was not difficult since the Soviet bombing campaign kept them restricted to caves and hideaways along the valley escarpment from which they could shoot down on the attacking Russians. Different from them were mobile units (known as *mutaharek*), with whom Massoud even attacked the Soviet airbase outside Kabul. Many of these fighters were not Massoud's Tajiks but had joined his forces because of his personal charisma and his reputation for success.

So disturbed by Massoud's growing importance were the Russians that when the truce expired in 1984, they attacked the Panjshir with overwhelming strength: Soviet air force jets carpet-bombed the entire valley as twenty thousand infantry troops aided by about five thousand Afghan government soldiers advanced behind columns of heavy tanks, and helicopters landed airborne contingents along the ridges. Anticipating the attack, Massoud had evacuated the thirty thousand inhabitants who had remained in the main valley and retreated into the side valleys that branched off it. As the perceptive French scholar Olivier Roy observed, Massoud shrewdly avoid combat and waited until the Russians were spread out and their lines of communication were overstretched. Then he counterattacked. The results were devastating to the Russians.

After the war, the Soviet general staff analyzed the reason for the

defeat, the deaths of nearly fifteen thousand soldiers and the wounding of another fifty thousand. They focused on the nature of guerrilla tactics that had been used against them. Since they had been made, painfully, into "experts," it is worth listening to their conclusions:

> Several combat principles lay at the heart of mujahadeen tactics. First, they avoided direct contact with the superior might of regular forces which could have wiped them out. Second, the mujahadeen practically never conducted positional warfare and when threatened with encirclement, would abandon their positions. Third, in all forms of combat the mujahadeen always strove to achieve surprise. Fourth, the mujahadeen employed terror and ideological conditioning on a peaceful populace as well as on local government representatives.
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> The mujahadeen knew the terrain intimately, were natural scouts, and were capable of transmitting necessary information about secret Soviet unit and subunit movements over great distances using rudimentary communications gear and signaling devices.
>
> Among the guerrilla forces tactical strong suits were all types of night actions, the ability to rapidly and clandestinely move in the mountains, and the fielding of a very broad agent reconnaissance network.

That report might have been written about Tito's Partisans or Ho Chi Minh's Viet Minh.

During the fighting Medicines sans Frontièrs doctors observed more than six hundred Russian vehicles destroyed in the four provinces in which they worked. As Claude Malhuret, the organization's executive director, commented, "which, when extrapolated, comes to a total figure of some three to four thousand for the entire country." Even more impressive was that when ground-to-air missiles began to be made available, the mujahideen claim to have destroyed four hundred aircraft. The Russians virtually stopped flying, and lacking air cover that had tied down and discovered guerrilla forces, Russian

ground forces were more vulnerable to ambush and tended to pull back to the cities. As a result, for most of the war, they occupied only about a fifth of the country.

Much as the Americans did in Vietnam in 1967 and 1968 and the Germans did in Yugoslavia, the Russians employed the most brutal forms of counterinsurgency: they aimed essentially to destroy the country and kill the inhabitants. Carpet bombing was used on towns and villages; dikes and irrigation works were blown up so that agricultural production fell by about half; forests were burned; roads and bridges were cut; and millions of small bombs were seeded into the countryside killing or wounding animals and people. As Jeri Laber and Barnett Rubin of Helsinki Watch summarized their findings, "the stories that we were to hear over and over again were these: 'The Russians bombed our village. Then the soldiers came. They killed women and children. They burned the wheat. They killed animals—cows, sheep, chickens. They took our food, put poison in the flour, stole our watches, jewelry, and money.'" The report continued, "The strategy of the Soviets and the Afghan government has been to spread terror in the countryside so that villagers will either be afraid to assist the resistance fighters who depend on them for food and shelter or will be forced to leave . . . We were told of brutal acts of violence by Soviet and Afghan forces: civilians burned alive, dynamited, beheaded; bound men forced to lie down on the road to be crushed by Soviet tanks; grenades thrown into rooms where women and children have been told to wait." Prisoners were summarily shot since the Russians claimed that they were illegal enemy combatants not covered by the Geneva Conventions.

The favored Russian weapons were anti-personnel mines. Although children particularly were attracted by plastic pens and red painted toy trucks, the effects on people could be reduced by clearing trails and inhabited areas. What really harmed the villagers was that the mines fell also on grazing areas so that livestock was crippled. As Malhuret continued, "When I arrived in Afghanistan for the first time in 1980, I was struck by the number of goats and cows that had legs in splints made of bamboo sticks and tied with wire . . . But

the greatest loss, the herdsmen explained to me, is not so much the ones with splints, but rather all those animals that were killed from secondary infections."

The one major counterinsurgency tactic the Russians did not try was the relocation of people to internment camps as British did in Malaysia and Kenya and the Americans did to "strategic hamlets" in Vietnam. In effect, Pakistan became their removal site, their strategic hamlet, as millions of Afghans fled the country under their relentless assaults.

When the last Russian troops crossed the Amu Darya river into Soviet territory in February 1989, at least one million Afghans had died. But that was not the end. A new force had been awakened by the Afghan war. As one *mujahid* told Peregrine Hodson with perhaps more foresight that he could have imagined, "The present war against the *Shuravi* is part of a greater war: the Islamic revolution. All over the world our brothers in the faith are awakening to a new spirit of religion." The Russians had planted dragon seed: they would keep on paying as they had for centuries in Chechnya and the Americans would begin to pay in Iraq. But even more than they, the Afghans would continue to pay as fighting continued among the warlords, then between the warlords and the Taliban, and finally between the Taliban and the Americans. There seems no end in sight.